

Sunday 25 February 2024

Milford Baptist Church

Words of Life from the Tree of Death

Jesus' Last Words from the Cross

Luke 23:32-43 – The Word of Salvation

'The Man in the Middle' – by Frankie May

One on the right
One on the left
The One in the middle
Will take His last breath

Accusations will fly
From one to the other
While the One in the middle
Listens as He suffers

Hours of bickering
Who was the worst
While the One in the middle
Was taking their curse

He's done nothing wrong
Said the one on the right
While the One in the middle
Shined like a light

The other one cursed
And mocked without care
While the One in the middle
Felt his despair

He turned to the other
With love in His eyes
And said today you will be with Me
In paradise

One of the thieves
Made the right choice
Then the One in the middle
Lifted his voice

The people around us
Listened and heard
The One in the middle
Say His last word

It is finished
It is done
The price has been payed
Forever has been won

Right there beneath Him
I finally see
The Man in the middle
He did this for me

The man in the middle. Jesus. As He was crucified, He made seven sayings, seven mini sermons, from the Cross.

These were “Words of Life from the Tree of Death.”

Each week from now until Easter we are focusing on one of these seven sayings.

Last week we looked at the Word of Forgiveness.

Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.

We saw that Jesus' first word was a prayer to His Heavenly Father, that he focused on others, that the 'them' included all the people there that day at Calvary, but also all of us, and that forgiveness is about receiving complete forgiveness from God, forgiving ourselves and forgiving others.

Today we're looking at the Word of Salvation.

Specifically, Jesus' words to one of the thieves beside Him: *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Such beautiful, comforting words of promise. But before we get to them this morning we're going to look at the passage just read to us and explore the context of it and how it relates to us.

Here is what we see in it:

Three Crosses.

Two Criminals

One Christ (The Man in the middle)

Three, two and one. Let's focus briefly on each of those things now.

Three Crosses.

Depictions of Jesus' Crucifixion often involve images of three crosses. His was the only Cross to offer salvation and forgiveness of sins, but we often will see three crosses represented.

Why is that?

One reason could be that the three Crosses represent the state of all people.

There is the unredeemed – thief number one

There is the redeemed – thief number two

And there is the Redeemer – the man in the middle.

All of humanity find themselves in this picture.

Jesus, the Redeemer, offers eternal life and salvation to all people who believe in Him. Some will believe and follow Him – they are the redeemed. Sadly, some will not believe or follow Him – they are the unredeemed.

But the point is that in the depiction of these three crosses, we are offered the choice to put our trust in the man in the middle – The Redeemer – or not put our trust in Him.

The three Crosses is a visually striking metaphor for those who call themselves followers of Jesus and His way of living, and those who do not.

Three men on three crosses, two guilty and deserving to be there, one innocent and falsely condemned.

Let's look at the two guilty ones now.

Two criminals.

They had made bad choices and were facing the consequences of their actions. Crucifixion.

Crucifixion was not a light punishment; it was reserved for the worst of the worst criminal offenders. So even though we know these two as two robbers or thieves, it's highly likely that as pastor Greg Laurie says, "They were likely terrorists or even murderers."

Not first time offenders.

Two requests were made to the man in the middle.

Let's look at the first thief's request:

Luke 23 verse 39:

Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and (save) us!"

The thief shouted out this request to Jesus. Aren't you meant to be the Messiah, the one to save all Israel? Well, why don't you save yourself by coming down off that Cross and then save us too.

He was likely referring to himself and the other thief.

This thief was insulting Jesus and adding his voice to the crowd and soldiers who were taunting Jesus and telling Him to save Himself.

If you think about it, this thief used a lot of his energy to insult Jesus. In some of his last moments on earth, He is criticising the Saviour of the world.

Did he believe Jesus was the Saviour? The text doesn't exactly say, but there's enough evidence for us to presume he didn't believe this. Instead, he was happy to hurl insults at Jesus.

And sadly, as we all know, there are people today that are happy to hurl insults at Jesus. They don't believe He is the Saviour of the world; yet they are happy to take his name in vain.

Like this thief, their hearts are hardened towards Jesus.

Before we look at the second request, let's pause to pray for those we know whose hearts are hard towards Jesus.

Lord Jesus, we bring before you now, the names of people that we know whose hearts are hard or closed towards you. Would you work in their hearts, soften them and make them open to hear the freedom and truth of the gospel. In your name we pray, Amen.

The second thief reprimands the first thief for not fearing God and tells him that while they both deserve to be on those Crosses, this man – the man in the middle - does not for he's done nothing wrong.

Then he makes his request to Jesus, in verse 42:

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

In other translations the word 'Lord' is used.

It's interesting to note that this second thief is the only person at this horrific scene, the crucifixion of Jesus, to use this word and openly confess Jesus as Lord. One of the Roman centurion says, "Surely this man was the Son of God," but nobody else uses the term 'Lord.'

From his own tree of death, this thief begs Jesus for his life. "Remember me."

There is desperation and hope in his voice. He is coming to Jesus with all he has – which, let's be honest, is not much.

This man is likely only hours or minutes away from death. He's being crucified because he deserves to be. His punishment is fitting. He's really got nothing to offer Jesus.

Just his life – which is slowly slipping away.

And I think that's the point. When we come to Jesus, we can offer him only what we have – our lives. Our messed up, broken, sinful lives. We can't dress ourselves up before Him. We can't pretend like we have it all together, like we have no conflict with others in our lives, like we don't struggle with sin and its consequences.

No, we're real and honest with Him and offer our lives to Him.

We want Him to remember us, just like this second thief's request.

He recognised that while the three of them on the Cross shared a common punishment, one thing they did not have in common was that the two of them were dying for their own sins, while the man in the middle, was innocent and dying for the sins of others.

There was a stark contrast between the two rightfully condemned robbers and their requests.

The one, unrepentant and mocking. He would soon experience God's wrath.

The other, repentant and humble. He would soon experience God's salvation.

Think through Scripture of other stark contrasts:

Think back to Genesis, Cain's offering and Abel's sacrifice.

Two brothers a sacrifice made;

One brought a lamb, the other his effort – the toil of his spade.

The younger killed the lamb and was accepted by Another;

The older murdered his brother and was marked by death like no other.

Or think of the two men at the temple, one self-righteous, one aware of his sin.

Two men went to the temple to pray;

The righteous stood proud, disgusted by the sinner at his side,

The other lowly bowed with barely a word to say;

No salvation to the haughty man, but the sinner joyously was saved.

Or consider the prodigal son and the elder religious brother.

Two brothers sought the father's heart to please;

One praised himself – his own righteous condition.

The other begged for mercy with a heart of contrition;

No peace for the elder son but the younger found salvation.

Think of these two rightfully condemned criminals.

Two criminals ascended to Calvary, condemned to die;

One joined the hateful throng,

the other listened humbly – his heart to the man in the middle drew nigh.

A greater death met the first thief's wrong,

While life everlasting came to the second from on high.

Think of them and us today.

One man, poor in spirit

Another, high and pious.

One man, low and humble,

Another, proud and pompous.

Which one are you?

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Is this the posture and cry of your heart today? Lord, remember me.

Three Crosses.

Two criminals.

One Christ (man in the middle).

Jesus has been silent in response to the first criminal. Not a word has been uttered.

But he responds to the second criminal:

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Today. You. Will. Be. With. Me. In. Paradise.

The words of salvation. Let's look closer at them now.

Today.

Jesus assures the second thief that salvation is his today, immediately. This is an instant declaration by the Saviour.

No conditions. No exceptions. No prescriptions. No waiting period.

Today is the day of salvation.

The apostle Paul echoes these words in 2 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 2:

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.

It's possible Paul was thinking about this exact moment between Jesus and thief number two.

Jesus' word of 'today' is for us as well. When we come to Him and believe in Him, we receive His salvation immediately.

Our sins are forgiven. We are made right with our holy God. We are justified and able to be in His presence.

Imagine the relief that washed over this criminal's body, mind and soul. As he was there dying, he hears Jesus' words of pardon and the promise that once he dies he will be with Jesus today. What comfort and joy that must have brought him.

And look at who these words of Jesus for.

Today you...

Jesus is talking to a criminal. A man who deserves the punishment for his crime or crimes. A man who is not far from death, a horrible death. A man with nothing to offer but a repentant heart.

Jesus' words of salvation are for this man. Not a celebrity, not a religious leader of the day, not one of the crowd.

A dying criminal.

The least qualified and lowliest of status.

We know that Jesus said He came to save the sick, not the healthy; the sinner and not the righteous; the poor in spirit and not the proud in heart.

He is living what He taught. Being a man of His word.

The second thief was in a posture of humility before Jesus. His heart was open to Him. He was repentant of his sinfulness.

You.

That includes me and you.

Have there not been times in our lives when we've lived like these two criminals? Our hearts have been far from God. We've had pride in our hearts. We've ignored God, betrayed others, put ourselves and our desires first.

When we've come to God and humbled ourselves, these words are for us too. Today, we will be with Him. He will be with us. Salvation is ours today.

Today you will be with me in paradise.

The second thief is assured by the man in the middle that not only will he be with him today, but that he will be with him today in paradise.

This personal encounter with Jesus saves him from eternal separation.

Paradise is being with Jesus.

Dr. David Jeremiah says this:

Heaven is where Jesus is. The Bible has many references to His presence there, and when we read it or hear it, the Bible leaves no question about the matter. When we go to heaven, we are going to be with Jesus. Heaven's not about a place; it's about a person!

Being right with God, having salvation in Christ, means that we have peace. Peace of mind knowing our eternal destination, yes, but also peace in that we can know Jesus right now on earth.

True Peace comes from knowing Jesus.

The man in the middle.

Perhaps the second thief breathed a huge sigh of relief when Jesus assured him that he will be with him in paradise. Perhaps he experienced a rush of comfort, delight and peace wash over him.

I know that when I think of the times I have come back to Jesus in my own life and committed my life back to him, I've been refreshed – physically and spiritually – it's the peace from knowing Him and knowing He is with me.

Maybe you're sitting here this morning and you haven't experienced this peace for a while. You are following Jesus, but it's the knowing Him intimately, experiencing His presence that your missing.

If that's you, I want to stop right now and pray specifically for you.

Lord Jesus, we desire to know you more intimately. To know you is to have peace and walk in clarity. I ask right now that for those of us here today who don't feel close to you, fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit, reveal yourself to us,

refresh us from the inside out. Your Word says that you give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and their trust in you.

We ask this in your name, Amen.

The man in the middle looked at the second thief on the cross and assured him that today he would be with him in paradise.

The man in the middle looks at us today and gives us the same promise.

There's a lot more we could say about what today means, what paradise is like, is it ever too late to be saved, how much must one do to earn eternal life, and much more.

But as we come to a close, let us focus on that man in the middle.

The one who was innocent.

The one who gave His life for ours.

The one who endured mocking and taunts from the crowd and the first thief on the cross.

The one who cared deeply for the second thief on the cross and promised him salvation. Life with him for eternity.

As we focus on him, I started with a poem and I'd like to finish with another poem.

Two Thieves - A Poem by Bob Gotti

There were two others on Calvary; two common men like you and me,
One on the left and one on the right, hanged with Jesus in plain sight,
Just like Jesus they were there to die, common people like you and I,
The two of them were convicted men; guilty felons to be condemned,
But those felons, one of a kind, displayed a different heart and mind.

One rebuked The Lord, at his side, casting insults at God, as he died,
The other, rebuked the felon instead, saying they deserve to be dead,
Turning to Christ he then implored, knowing Christ was God and Lord,
Humbly saying to God's Son, remember me when up in your kingdom,
Then, said the Lord Jesus Christ, "Today you'll be with me in Paradise."

Common criminals, but so far apart, as The Lord looks into their heart,
As we study that picture enlarged; of common men, guilty as charged,
This is an illustration of us all, for everyone's guilty, under Adam's fall,
All are guilty down through the ages, and all facing sin's eternal wages,
Eternal death is the penalty laid, by God, upon all, which is to be paid.

Back to the One on the centre cross, Christ who died for all those lost,
God's Son, who became a sacrifice, to pay for all God's Eternal Price,
And, just like both of those thieves, we must make a choice of beliefs,
If it's the first thief's choice you make, you the Saviour will also forsake,
But if like the second, you believe, a place in Paradise you will receive.

Jesus' promise, one of His final sermons,

Some of his last words of life from the tree of death, are for all of us.

Jesus looks at you and me and offers us the ongoing choice – to believe in Him,
to follow Him, to trust Him, to humble ourselves, bring our lives before Him,
repent of our sins, and accept the gift of salvation.

Let's pray.